

# What leads young women to disclose abuse in their first relationships?

April 21 2021, by Caroline Brooks

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"Raising awareness about these different types of partner violence is important, so survivors can label what they are experiencing, ideally early on during the relationship, share with someone and be met with nonjudgmental support."

Credit: Alex Green from Pexels

Women who experience partner violence at a young age don't always show physical signs of abuse and don't always disclose—or recognize—the dangerous position they're in. A new study from Michigan State University is one of the first to examine multiple factors

that influence young women's disclosure of partner violence that occurred during their first relationships, when they were just under 15 years old, on average.

"Physical abuse is widely understood as unhealthy, wrong and abusive, but [sexual violence](#) and [coercive control](#) are less understood and still pretty hidden, especially among [young women](#)," said Angie C. Kennedy, MSU associate professor of social work and lead author. "Raising awareness about these different types of partner [violence](#) is important, so survivors can label what they are experiencing, ideally early on during the relationship, share with someone and be met with nonjudgmental support."

The study was published in the *Journal of Family Violence* and includes co-authors Elizabeth Meier, a doctoral candidate in MSU's School of Social Work, and Kristen A. Prock, an assistant professor of social work at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

The researchers interviewed a diverse group of young women between the ages of 18 and 24, all of whom had endured some form of partner violence with their first boyfriends. Overall, 91% experienced physical partner violence, 58% of which was severe; 91% experienced coercive control, which involves a partner having control over a survivor's life; and 50% experienced sexual partner violence, defined as rape or attempted rape.

Further, the interviews revealed four patterns of partner violence and disclosure:

- 1) Nearly 20% of women experienced both physical and coercive control that was severe. The coercive control included forced isolation from others, which made it very difficult to disclose, but they all eventually told someone and were able to escape the relationship.

2) Several women who were raped by their boyfriends had experienced a lot of abuse growing up, which led them to minimize the sexual violence. Additionally, some participants who had been raped noted they had been socialized to believe that forced sex was part of their role as a girlfriend. These factors resulted in limited or no disclosure.

3) More than 80% of the women reported feeling stigmatization such as shame or self-blame related to the partner violence, which was a barrier to them disclosing.

4) Only a few participants sought help from law enforcement. Those who sought help had experienced severe physical violence or coercive control, but not sexual violence. They also had a supportive friend or family member, or a personal connection to law enforcement, which aided in their disclosure.

"I was surprised by the severity of the partner violence many experienced, oftentimes at a young age. The partner rape was especially alarming," Kennedy said. "Some of these relationships can go on for years, and while the abuse stays secret, the suffering young women experience is immense."

Kennedy says that she is encouraged by survivors going public with their experiences and using the media to share their stories and hold their abusers accountable.

"Seeing people going public with their stories of [partner violence](#)—especially recent examples of high-profile young [women](#) like FKA twigs and Evan Rachel Wood—can help survivors make sense of their own experiences and lift the shame and self-blame they've been carrying," she said.

**More information:** Angie C. Kennedy et al. A Qualitative Study of

Young Women's Abusive First Relationships: What Factors Shape their Process of Disclosure?, *Journal of Family Violence* (2021). [DOI: 10.1007/s10896-021-00258-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-021-00258-5)

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